

INDIAN SKEPTIC

No. 01/06

June 2010

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editor & publisher

manoj trichambaram

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*It shall be the duty
of every citizen of
India -*

*to develop the
scientific temper,
humanism and the
spirit of inquiry and
reform*

*(Article 51A (h) Part IVA -
Fundamental Duties,
Constitution of India)*

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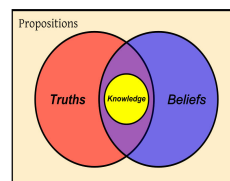
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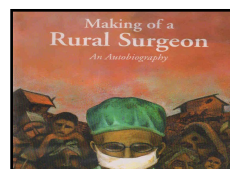
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Delayed Waking Up

Terrorism Investigations

Ram Puniyani

The Ajmer bomb blasts took place on 11th October 2007; these took place inside the Shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, killing two people. In the wake of this the central Home minister, in his standard statement said that this is the handiwork of HUJI and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba type groups who are indulging in these activities and this is aimed to disrupt the communal harmony in the country. Three years down the line now a RSS functionary Devendra Gupta and his associates have been accused of triggering this blast and have been arrested. To cap it all there seems to be the connection between this Ajmer blast and the blast which took place in Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad, which took place a few months ago of this Ajmer blast (May 2007).



There is also the news that the Rajasthan police despite evidence delayed the investigation of Ajmer blasts as the leads of investigation pointed towards the involvement of Hindu right wing terror gangs. One also hears that since Sadhvi

Shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, Ajmer



Pragya Singh Thakur was arrested in connection with Malegaon blasts, her links led to Swami Asimanand of Dangs, who is the major RSS combine figure of the area. He is absconding since then. And now apart from Maharashtra police Rajasthan police is also looking for him.

Strange things have happened in connection with the investigation of blasts during last few years. The thesis guiding the police investigation for a long time was that terror groups are being promoted by Pakistan and they want to create communal disharmony, that they are putting bombs in places of Muslim worship. It is due to this and the inherent biases of our investigation agencies that for so long and despite clear involvement of terror groups inspired and connected with ideology of RSS were not touched. It was after Hemant Karkare discovered the irrefutable evidence of Sadhvi's motor cycle used in Malegaon blasts and her connections with all others, Lt Col. Prasad Shrikant Purohit, Swami Dayanand Pande, Retd. Major Upadhya etc., that the nexus was discovered. After the tragic killing of Hemant Karkare again the investigation has put on the slow track. In the face of such strong evidences now some of the investigation authorities are forced to wake up to the threat of terrorism done by these groups.

There has been a pattern of these terror attacks done by the likes of Sadhvi, those connected with RSS ideology or remotely connected with organizations floated by the ones' trained in RSS ideology. This raises lot of questions about the professional competence of our investigation agencies. The blasts took place in the places where predominantly Muslims congregate, blasts took place at times when their numbers was maximum in the places of prayer. The observation was that after the blasts, blinded by the inherent biases, the investigation agencies made it a routine to arrest some Muslim youth. The names of HUJI, Lashkar, and SIMI have been dished out and lapped up by media which has shaped the public opinion.

The problems which we witnessed in this are two fold. One, the innocents were tortured and their lives and careers were ruined by this crass attitude and second the real culprits carried on merrily one after the other, knowing full well that they will be protected because of their religion and because of their organization, which makes maximum noises against terrorism itself.

The pattern began with Nanded in 2006, when two Bajrang Dal workers died while making bombs, in the same city later a Shiv Sena Shaka member died in the go-down storing biscuits, two Bajrang Dal Workers died in Kanpur in 2008 and many such incidents kept going on. The tide in a way turned when the irrefutable evidence of Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur's motor cycle being used in Malegaon blast was detected. The immaculate investigation done by Maharashtra ATS led to the detection of the involvement of other such affiliates (meaning all those organization who subscribe to ideology of Hindu Nation, Hindutva and whose core team is trained in this ideology). Sadhvi's photo was also seen with the BJP President Rajnath Singh. Surely after the arrest of the real culprits starting from the Sadhvi, the frequency of terror attacks has come down. In Thane on 4th June 2008, two Hindu Jagran Samiti workers were arrested for planting the bombs in the basement of Gadkari Rangayatan, due to which 7 people got injured. The same group was involved in the blasts in Vashi, Panvel also. This group was also involved in the bomb blast in Goa, recently on the occasion of Narak Chaturdashi. This group idolizes Savarkar (Hindu Mahasabha) and Hedgewar (RSS) and indoctrinates its members into hating Christians and Muslims.

Similarly on 24th August 2008 two Bajrang Dal activists died in Kanpur, while making bombs. The Kanpur zone IGP S.N. Singh stated that their investigations have revealed that this group was planning massive explosions all over the state. Indian Express, 23 Oct 2008 reports that those involved in the bomb blast in Malegaon and

Modasa (Sept 2008) had links with Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad.

Similarly in Tenkasi, Tamil Nadu pipe bomb attack on RSS office (Jan.2008) was projected to have been done by Jehadi Muslims. The investigation revealed many a Hindu names and later the investigations was frozen. In an alleged Fidayin attack was claimed that in the attack on RSS office in Nagpur (June 1, 2006) three of them were killed in the police encounter, as per the police version. Citizens Inquiry report, headed by Justice Kolse Patil doubted the police version in a serious way; the clarifications did not come through from the authorities.

Pained by this attitude of the State and investigating authorities a Citizens tribunal was held in Hyderabad August 2008, the tribunal concluded that, “This fight against terrorism, victims emphasized, has veered more around witch hunting of Muslims rather than curbing terrorism, thus robbing people of their liberty and freedom and making them more insecure than ever before. The real culprits, they said, often roam freely whereas the poor and gullible Muslims are picked up and thrown into jails at whims and fancies of the powers that be. Victims after victims, who have undergone harassment and torture without any evidence permissible in the court of law against them, deposed before the tribunal — comprising country’s eminent personalities including former judges, lawyers and

renowned social activists – and narrated their tales of woes to the shock and anguish of hundreds of audience.”

One of the major hurdles which have obstructed the truth coming out is that the investigation of the blasts cases is not easy and a lot depends on the investigation authorities’ attitude and bias. In these cases media generally laps up whatever is dished out by police and not much of independent voice comes up. Those doubting the police version are dubbed as anti national and media keeps itself at safe distance from those who care to pick the holes in theory put out by police. Usual norm of journalism should be to doubt the state version also and not to dismiss those who have alternative version. In cases of terror attacks this norm is kept aside. It is because of this that so far the investigations do not get the corrective direction, and many a times are totally fallacious, as the truth coming out from Ajmer case and other similar cases show us. One hopes that professionalism prevails over biases and independent voices are not stifled in such matters if we want to reach the truth, if we want to ensure that such attacks do not repeat themselves.

BS

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With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil – that takes religion.

Steven Weinberg

Quoted by Victor J Stenger in *God: The Failed Hypothesis*(2007)

60 years of Secularism in India

Innaiah Narisetti

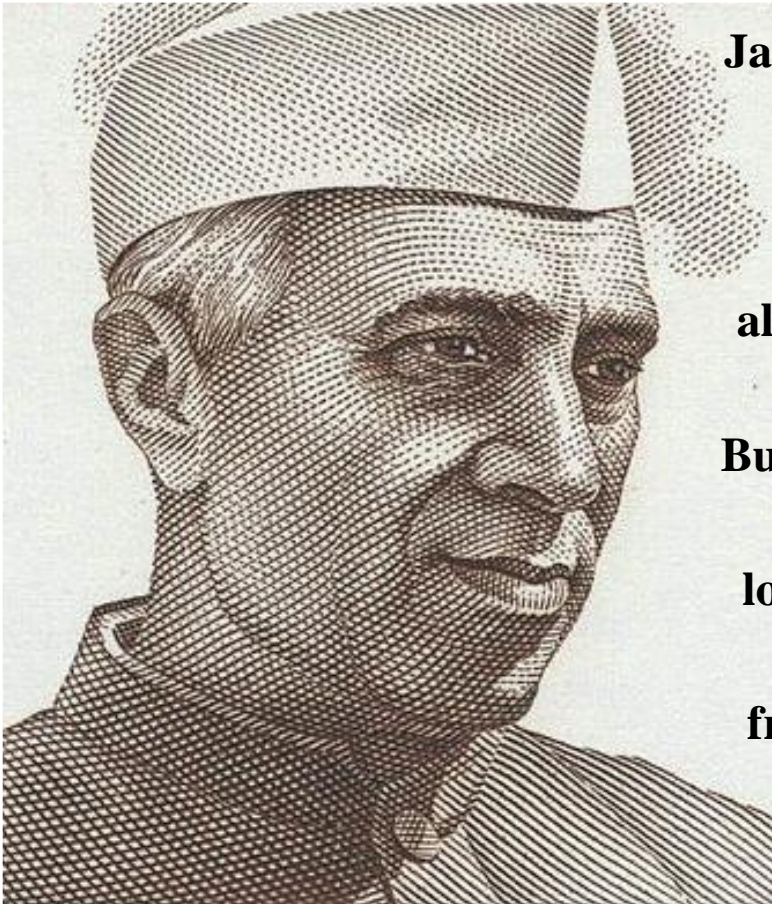
Six decades ago M N Roy defined secularism as separation of state and religion.

But since independence in 1947 and achieving republic status in 1950, India has been following a peculiar secularism. Often the political parties, especially the religious oriented, dub Secularism as “Western” concept.

Dr Radhakrishnan, the interpreter of Hinduism and President of India defined secularism as equal respect to all religions and said that it never should be considered as irreligious. Political parties in power follow this definition and take advantage of the situation to their advantage.

religion from politics, especially the state. Gandhiji always practiced religion in politics through prayers. He followed the principle of equal respect to all religions. At the fag end of his life Gandhi wanted non-interference of state in the religious matters. He also emphasized the separation of religion so that it can be practiced only at personal level. But that was too late. He did not live longer to propagate the separation of religion from politics.

Jawaharlal Nehru as the first Prime Minister of India always stood for secularism. But he could not take it to the logical end due to pressures from political and religious lobbies. He even failed to implement a Uniform Civil Code in the country.



Jawaharlal Nehru as the first

Prime Minister of India

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Indian Constitution

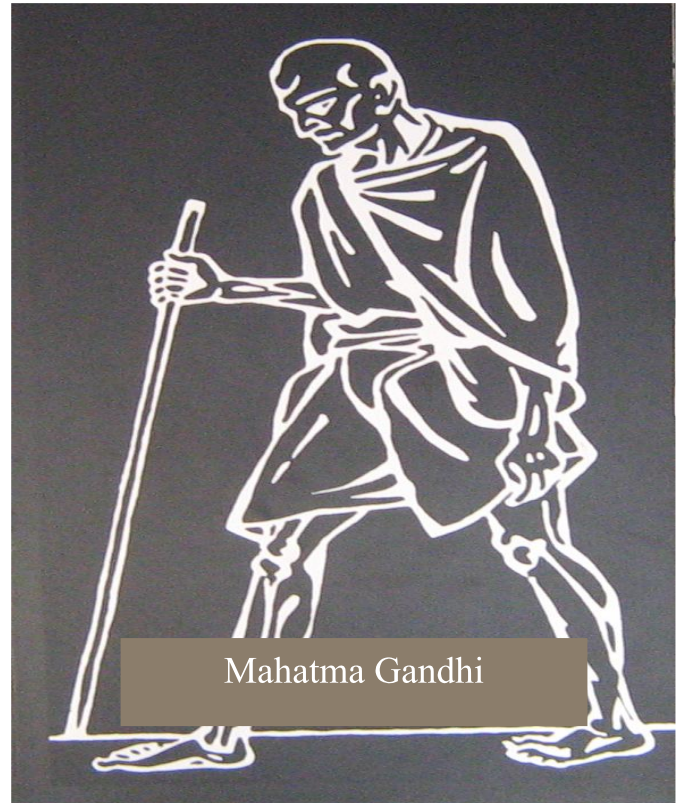
The Indian Constitution clearly states, “nothing in this article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the state from making any law regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice” (Article 25 (2) (a) Constitution of India).

Through 42nd amendment to the Constitution in 1976, the preamble stated: “We the people of India having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign Secular Democratic Republic”. Yet the political parties who oppose the secular principle and who support the practice of Secularism dare not interpret in proper perspective.

A.B.Shah founded The Secular Society and commenced a magazine The Secularist. He vigorously perused the ideals and published several books and organized conferences and recruited eminent persons. One such person was Hamid Dalwai who stood for renaissance among Muslims and started Satya Shodhak Mandal. A B Shah challenged Puri Sankaracharya about cow cult in Vedas. He pleaded for secular education from primary school level. His legacy is now continued by V K Sinha and SVRaju. Abraham Solomon, Laxman Sastri Joshi, G D Parekh, V M Tarkunde, Prabhakar Padhe, Dhabolkar, Sib Narayan ray, M.P.Rege and Avula Gopalakrishna Murty, M.V.Ramamurthy and several others joined A B Shah in promoting secular ideas in the traditional Indian society. V John, J B Naik along with a host of others worked vigorously in the field of education. A B Shah published several books on secularism by establishing Nachiketa publications. The journals, *Quest* and *New Quest*, stood for secular ideas.

Congress Party

Usually the Indian National Congress is considered to be a secular political party. However, barring Jawaharlal Nehru, all the



congress prime ministers, ministers, and others at various levels followed religious practices “officially”. They invite Hindu priests on the occasion of oath taking ceremonies, inaugurations, opening of new projects, laying foundations, etc. To avoid criticism they involve Christian priests, Sikh and Buddhist and Muslim Mullahs too. They visit temples and receive honors “officially”. They exhibit their faith publicly at the cost of government funds, which means people’s money. The government officially declares holidays on all religious festivals. Temples, Masjid and churches are allowed in the premises of government offices. During office hours the prayers are allowed. Persons bring their own individual Guru’s pictures and images into the offices. Government officially patronages pilgrimages, provide all facilities and extend financial concessions. Government lands are allotted to religious purposes.

Each religion took advantage of the weakness of political parties and benefited much in several ways. Religious establishments became powerful. All religions get exemptions from taxes. There is no accountability for the business affairs conducted in the name of spiritual activity.

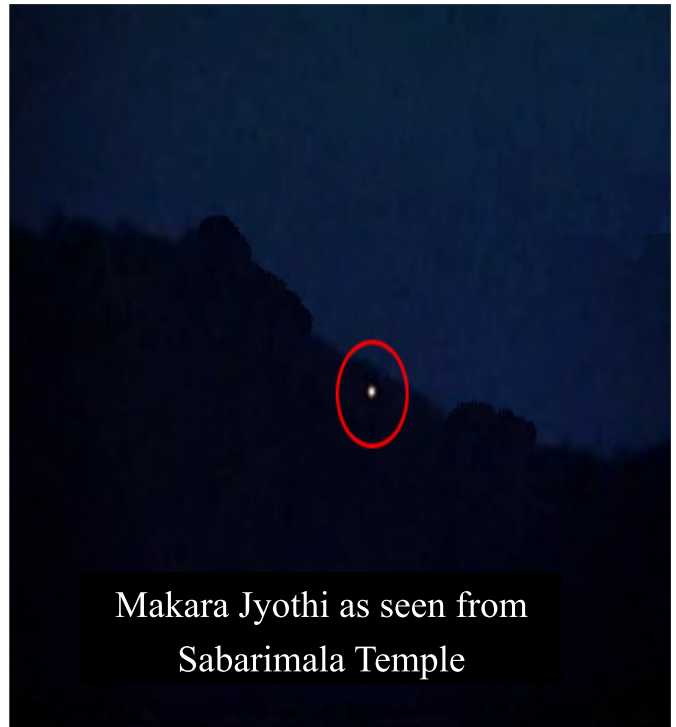
Cult Babas and holy women gather around politicians and build empires of ashrams. Even criminal activity of holy persons goes undetected except in rare cases.

Dhirendra Brahmachari, a cult holy person, was very powerful during Mrs. Indira Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister. Chanda Swami, another cult person, emerged as spiritual ambassador during the time of Mr. P.V.Narasimharao's premiership. Ravi Shankar, Ram Dev, Matha Amritanandamayi, and Satya Sai baba have devotees in the government, which has become very convenient and advantageous to the cult gurus. In each state several holy cult persons amassed wealth and established powerful empires. They developed connections with politicians who always come to their support in need. Sankaracharya of Kanchi involved in criminal activity and he was arrested in Tamil Nadu. But the Hindu political parties such as BJ P tried come to his rescue.

Presidents of India prostrated before the religious persons and visited several of them "officially". Rajendra Prasad, Sankar Dayal Sarma, Abul Kalam are typical examples. Atal Behari Vajpaye, P.V.Narasimharao as prime ministers set bad example in this aspect. All these practices made secularism more difficult in public life. The confusion about secularism percolated to all levels. The compulsion of elections, made the political parties impotent before cults, religious holy persons.

The Communist Parties too!

The left parties are supposed to be secular and non-religious, if not irreligious. But this is not so. Communists gained power in states several times. They did not practice secularism. Take the example of Kerala. Communists ruled the south Indian state for quite some time. There is an Ayyappa cult in Kerala. People annually visit the Ayyappa temple located on the top of Sabarmalai hills. Devotees from neighboring states too visit this temple in



Makara Jyothi as seen from
Sabarimala Temple

thousands. On the last day (January 14) of the Makaravilakku, the government officially sponsors, with the help of electricity department, forest department, and the temple administration, a 'divine miracle' locally known as Makarajyothi. On one of the hills facing Sabarimala temple, the government arranges to light a camphor fire for a few seconds, which appears to the devotees in Sabarimala as miraculous and is treated as the divine appearance of Ayyappan, the deity of the temple. This practice has been going on for decades. Communists also participate in this anti-secular make belief. When there were protests, the Chief Minister of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led government defended the practice saying that the state gains much through revenue from pilgrims and hence there should be no protest.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) is in power in West Bengal state. Every year animal sacrifices were performed for 9 days during the Durga cult festival with all pomp. The state government makes all arrangements and encourages the religious practice. The communist government described this practice as "cultural" and continues to gain popularity among people. This is another compromising attitude to perpetuate political power. Communists

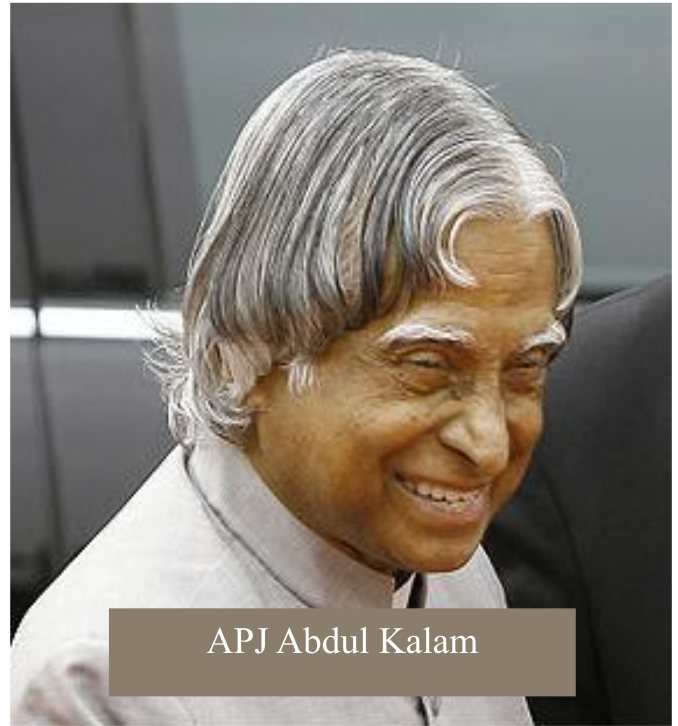
never tried to educate people about wrong notions of Durga cult, lest they should lose cheap popularity. West Bengal communist government closed its eyes to the atrocities of Mother Teresa in treating sick children and also kept silent when she diverted the funds to Catholic Church instead of spending on poor children.

Late Surjit Singh, the leader of CPI (M) from Punjab state used to wear Sikh turban, grows beard and moustache. He looks like typical Sikh religious person. Sikh religion insists that hair should not be cut; turban is must and so on and so forth. The communist leader never resisted this Sikh religious practice nor tried to educate the Sikhs that dress is personal. On the other hand they defend these cult practices in dress, food as “cultural” and follow them!

Even the Maoists are no exception. There is popular cult worship and festival in Telungana, which is celebrated annually. It is called Sammakka and Saarakka jatara. It is nothing but religious cult where people gather and do all sorts of cult practices. Yet the communists participate and support this jatara depicting Sammakka and Sarakka as tribal heroins. Thus they are absorbed in mass religious practice. The popular singer Gaddar visited Ramappa temple, Bhadradi temple and prayed for achieving Telengana separate state!

Scientist President APJ Abdul Kalam's Secularism

Prof APJ Abdul Kalam is a rocket technologist from South India. When he was elected as the President of India, secularists felt happy and expected genuine secular practice from the highest dignitary. But Prof Kalam started visiting cult persons like Satya Sai Baba, Matha Amrithananda Mayi and Brahma Kumaris. This practice of encouraging holy persons started with the first President of India, Mr. Rajendra Prasad. He not only visited religious leaders but also even went to the extent of washing their feet in public. The Presidents Sankar Dayal Sarma and



Venkataraman too officially exhibited their faith.

The Bharatiya Janata Party was in power for some time in the center and in some states. They stood for religion and hence there is no expectation from them to practice secularism. The disappointment came from Congress party and left parties.

The minorities, Muslims Christians, Sikhs etc, took advantage of the gross misinterpretation of secularism and gained much for their religious practices. Muslims started ignoring the rulings of Supreme Court regarding noise pollution at the time of prayers. Muslims use loud speakers causing nuisance to residents, students during examination time. Christians and Hindus also imitate them and started using loud speakers as though god is deaf! Religious churches, masjids, Hindu mandirs are built obstructing the roads and traffic as if anything and everything is possible if done in the name of religion.

Thousands of ‘holy’ persons earn illegal money and properties, because of tax exemptions and they need not submit annual accounts too! Most religious places involve in business that has become very lucrative and powerful centers. Tirumala-

Tirupati has become the largest pilgrimage center with enormous amounts of income. The source of money given by the devotees of this temple is often not revealed and hence much illegal amount reaches the holy place and the government accepts this practice in the name of religion. All such illegal and anti secular activities are rampant throughout the country, shared by all the political parties. The secrecy of donors is not revealed.

Future of Secularism in India

India has to begin the practice of Secularism, somewhere. To start with, there should be clear understanding that Secularism means separation of State and religion in all matters. Religion is faith based and hence confine to individual belief related to god and supernatural spirituality. In the matters of state the law should be equal to all irrespective of religion. There should be no exemptions to the principle that all are equal before law. Some people including religious persons should not be kept above law under any circumstance.

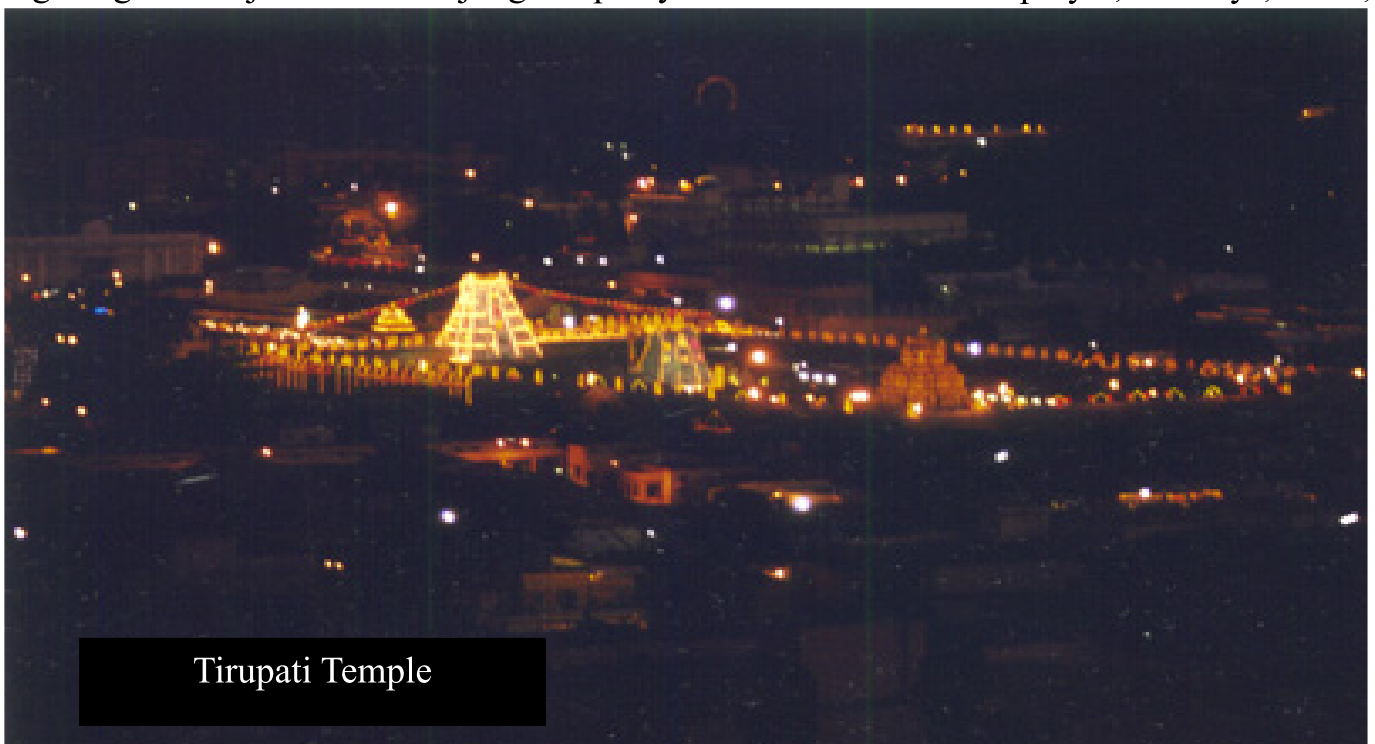
In India some judges visit holy persons “publicly”. This creates problems. It would be difficult for victims of holy persons to fight against injustice when judges openly

prostrate before the holy persons. Justice cannot be expected from such persons.

Similarly law enforcing officials and Police should not exhibit their personal faith openly. Holy persons who indulge in criminal activity take shelter with the support of police devotees. These things has been happening continuously in India. Religious crimes also are crimes. There should be no exemptions to spiritual and religious persons so far as crimes, misappropriation of funds, and sexual abuses are concerned.

Religious practices of untouchability, castes, child marriages, sati (the gruesome practice of immolation of wife when husband dies), oppression of minorities, discrimination against women, child labor, etc should not be tolerated and there should be no exemption to those who practice them. Holy loafers should not get any exemption from law. In the field of education, scientific method should be inculcated from primary level. Religious instruction should not be included in texts, curriculum since that belongs to faith and belief.

Rights of minorities so far as religion is concerned should be confined to personal level. This includes prayer, holidays, dress,



Tirupati Temple

food habits and civil law. They must not be brought to the streets.

In India Religion encroached into politics and public life. Thus religious belief system vitiated the moral life of the people. Religious morality should not be confused with values and ethics. Religious values, and morality are strictly confined to divine laws and supernatural realm. There is no verification, nor proof for religious belief systems and religious values including moral faith. They should not be confused with human rights, human values and human morals. Secular values are moral, and human. Secular values are not in any way connected with supernatural and paranormal systems.

Human rights and religions often don't go together. When human rights and values emphasize that all are equal, men and women have the same rights, religions don't accept. That is the crux of the point. In such cases religions wish to follow their holy texts like Gita, Koran, Bible, etc which preach inequality between men and women. Secularism stands for sincere equality and genuine practice human rights and values.

India needs secular practices in all walks of life. That will put India in futuristic stance. All state and Central governments can observe secular holidays leaving the religious holidays to those who observe them. That will make a good beginning for secular practice in India.

The fighters for Dalits, depressed groups, and scheduled castes think that temple entry on equal footing with Hindus will solve the problem. Some reformers mistakenly think that if Dalits can be taught to become temple priests and marriage performance priests, that will uplift them. They are mistaken. In fact they are leading blindly into the Hindu caste system, gradation method and accepting the Karma theory! Exactly that is the reason why B R Ambedkar wanted the Dalits to leave Hinduism so that they can bid good bye to

untouchability, caste degradation. Temples, priesthood and religion will not uplift the Dalits and suppressed classes. On the other hand those deceitful practices lure the weak minds to accept suppression.

Religious practices defy even Supreme Court orders. All religious prayer halls use mikes and create noise pollution. People object but the establishment never cared the complaints. At one stage Supreme Court ordered that all the mikes should be removed from prayer halls of all religious places. But it is observed more in breach. Similarly religious constructions obstruct traffic in cities very often. When the government tries to remove them, there will be a hue and cry. Secular practices with human dignity, human values and human morality will alone bring India into great future.

Role of Media

There are alarming trends in electronic and print media. There are several anti-secular attitudes which are causing distressing aspects. The most unscientific beliefs, superstitions, blind religious practices are encouraged in print media and also on TV channels. Much publicity is given to horoscopes, astrological predictions, alternative pseudo medicines, gem therapy, stone therapy, beads, pyramids, music therapies. The government of India clearly banned some of these unscientific and religious oriented medical practices and cures. Yet the press is encouraging them through advertisements and preaching. Business aspects are dominating the media, ignoring the ethical values, human dignity and secular morality. Center for Inquiry and other humanist, rationalist organizations appealed to the media to put a scroll across such items as "Not Proven Scientifically" but the media turned deaf ear to such sane approach. Secularism has to go long way in India but that is must for its bright future.

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"My" Personal Beliefs

ATHEIST EVE

TH DESIGN ©2010



Tracie Harris is a graphic designer in Austin, Texas, US. According to the website, <http://www.atheist-community.org/>, "her long, slow recovery from a rabid fundamentalist upbringing led her to the creation of *Atheist Eve*".

Tracie Harris has been publishing *Atheist Eve* since 1 October 2004 and all her earlier works are archived at: <http://www.atheist-community.org/atheisteve/>. *Atheist Eve* is reproduced by *Indian Skeptic* with the author's permission.

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Philosophy With Selvi - What Is Knowledge?

Epistemology For Beginners

Ajita Kamal

The question caught Sandanam by surprise. Without giving it much thought, she pointed at the trees through the window of the living room they were sitting in and said *“It’s how the universe talks to us. We have to listen hard to make sense of it”*.

The house was situated on the grounds of a small park. Sandanam has just finished her evening ritual of watching the sun set over the trees, before settling down in front of the television.

Now she was looking at her daughter who was standing in front of her. Selvi had questions for her mother- questions that were not very clear to her, and yet seemed somehow profound and central to her purpose. These questions came to her at every turn. This time she was struck when she was doing her math homework. Her little head was filled with a deep desire to understand how the rules of mathematics related to reality. After talking about it to her dog, Puli, for an hour, she had worked her way down to some really fundamental questions. She tried to give form to her ideas, but the words fell short. Now, standing in front of her mother, she cleared her throat and began again.

“Ma, how do we know these things... I mean, how do we know that anything is true at all?... I mean—”

“OK, let’s look at this.”, her mother interrupted. She was starting to realize that metaphors would not be sufficient to satisfy

Selvi this time. The girl was thinking.

“What do you mean when you say the word ‘know’?”, Sandanam asked her daughter.

The girl frowned.

Sandanam continued, *“It is good to first make sure that we both understand what we mean by ‘knowledge’ before we go any further. Knowledge has three parts. The first part is **belief**. The second part is **truth**. The third part is the way in which we connect belief with the **truth**. This part is called **justification**.”* She paused for a few seconds and said,

*“Do you **believe** that horses exist?”*

“Yes” said Selvi stoutly.

*“Is it **true** that horses exist?”*

“Yes”

*“Do you **know** that horses exist?”*

“Yes”

*How do you **know** that horses exist?*

Selvi’s lips curved mischievously as she looked at her mother and she giggled. She quickly composed herself when she realized her mother was being serious.

“Because ... I have seen them...I just told you its true that horses exist and you didn’t object to that”, she smiled.

Sandanam smiled back at her daughter. *“Okay, then let’s try to understand how you think about ‘truth’”, she said. “Is ‘truth’ the same thing as ‘knowledge’?”*

“No. Something can be true without me knowing about it”. Selvi smiled, realizing how her mother had led her to the answer.

Puli, the dog, stretched his legs lazily on the floor and turned his head at Selvi. She look at him, then cocked her head until it was at the same angle as Puli’s head.

Sandanam urged Selvi on, saying *“So, ‘knowledge’ is not related to ‘truth’?”*

Selvi thought about this as she stared into Puli’s face, then turned to look back at her mother. She crossed her feet and swung her hands to and fro. Then she said, *“Knowledge needs truth and it needs me to be the knower”.*

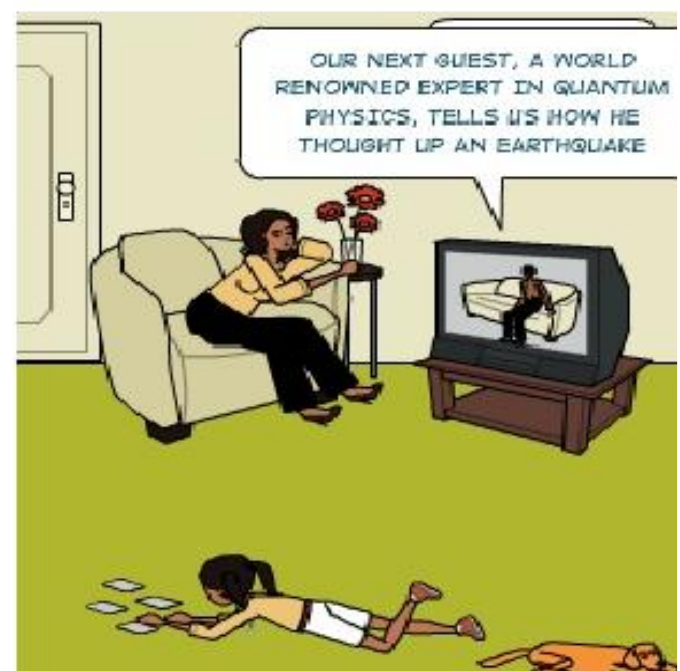
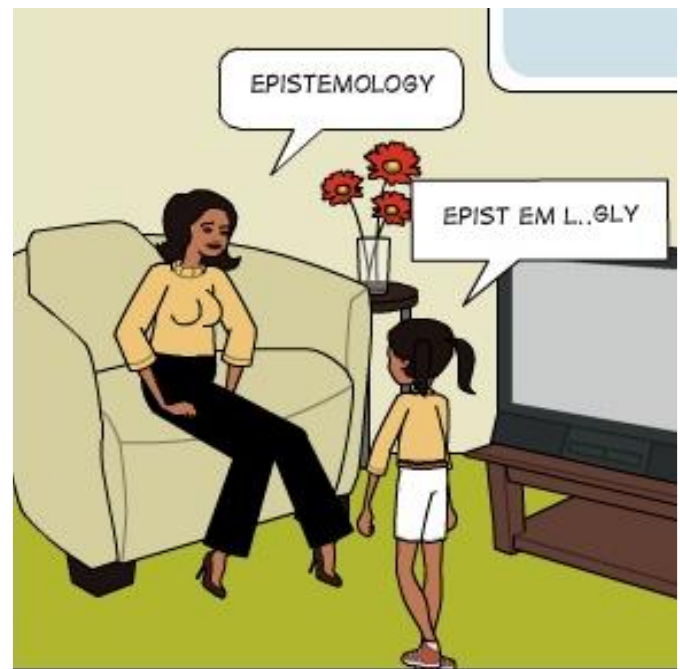
“Very good!”, said Sandanam. *“Knowledge requires both the truth as well as a person to know that truth. This person can be called an ‘observer’. For something to be true, it must exist even when there is no observer. Then the thing can be said to be true “objectively”.*” She pointed at the TV and said, *“Do you see that TV screen?”*.

“Yes”, said Selvi.

“Okay. Imagine you are the only person who can see it. Everyone else sees a vase where you see the TV. In a situation like that, it would be difficult to say that you ‘know’ that the TV exists ‘objectively’. Fortunately for us, the universe acts in certain predictable ways that we can use to construct and justify informed beliefs. In reality, we both see the TV. The TV exists ‘objectively’, because we can confirm that it would continue to exist in this living room if you and I walk into the kitchen.”

“Is that justification?”, asked Selvi.

“One kind of justification, yes.” Sandanam paused. She took a deep breath, then said:



“In regular conversation we often justify actions rather than beliefs. This is a different type of justification from the one we are interested in. For example, I can justify picking oranges over apples at the market by simply stating that I don’t want apples; by pointing out that I am not obligated to pick apples. However, this form of justification cannot apply when we are dealing with true belief and knowledge. I cannot say that I know something because I am not obligated to believe that it is wrong. To overcome this, philosophers have come up with various rules that can be applied to make the idea of justification more accurate when we are talking about knowledge.

When you want to confirm that something is true, you must first look for the evidence (more here). Also, you must ask how reliable is the source of the evidence obtained (more here). Based on the type of justification, knowledge can be internalist or externalist. To put it in a simple form, internalist justifications consider that complete knowledge is possible from within an internally consistent framework, often by studying observations born out of sensory

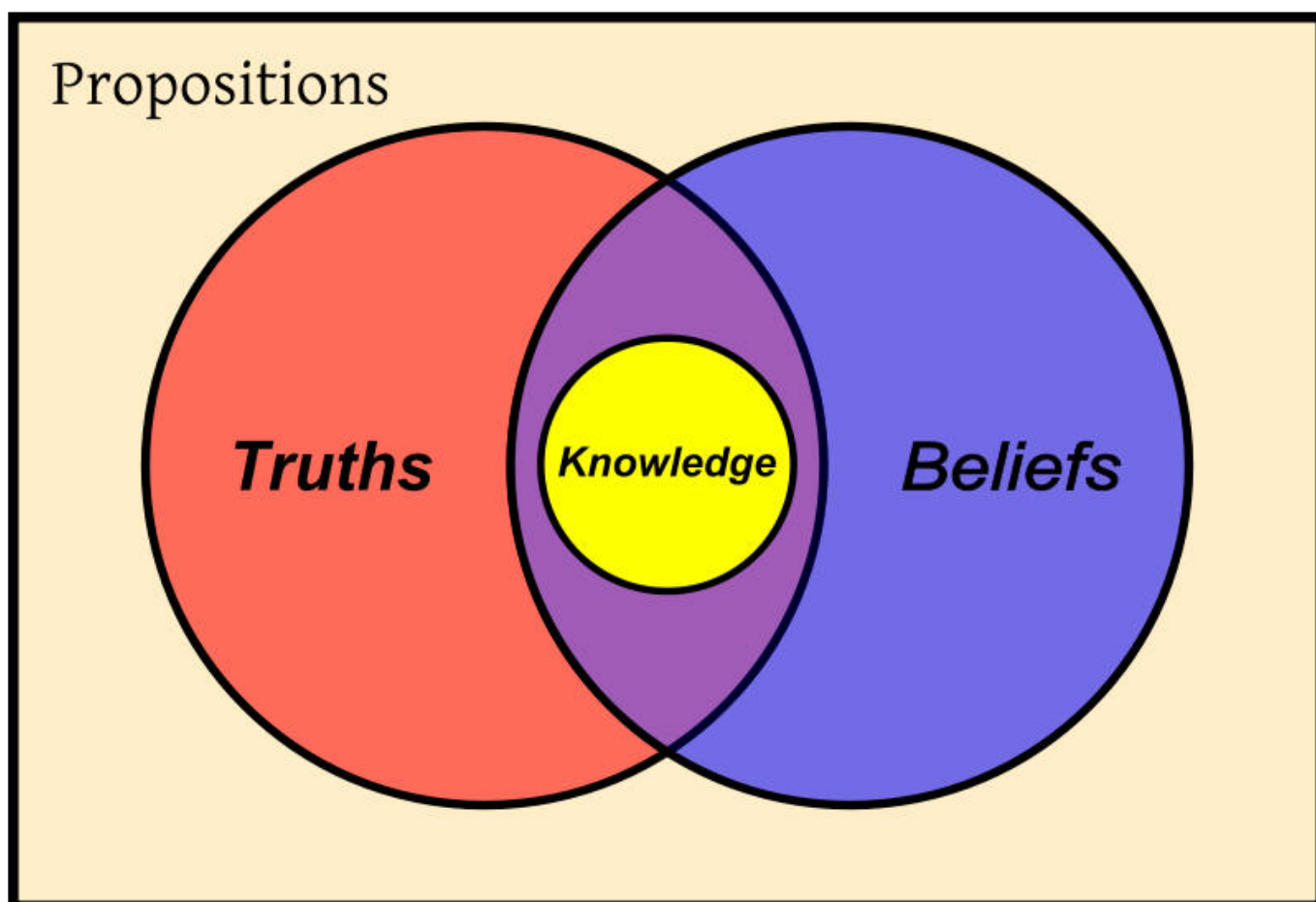
experience. This form of justification includes some schools of thought such as Rationalism. Externalist justifications take into account the relationship of an event with objects and events outside the sphere of the event (often outside subjective reality). This form of justification accommodates the notion of causality, which we spoke about earlier.”

A few seconds passed with neither of them saying anything. Puli was resting his head on his paws, taking a nap. On the TV, a famous charlatan was talking about quantum mysticism. Outside, the crickets chirped loudly, their mating calls echoing off the buildings on the street across from the park. Selvi decided that the steady chirping made more sense than the man on the TV.

Another thought came to Selvi.

“The evidence... isn’t evidence also a belief?”, she asked her mother.

“Yes”, said Sandanam. “Each and every observation that is claimed as evidence



*requires justification and belief. This brings us to another aspect of justification, called the structure of justification. **How do all the beliefs that we hold relate to each other? And how do those relationships between beliefs create knowledge?** These are just some of the questions that are asked and answered within the discipline of philosophy called ‘Epistemology’“*

Puli was snoring softly. On the TV, a man was talking about the earthquake in California. He was announcing a special guest on the show; the man named Deepak Chopra, the one who distorts quantum physics to suit his own mystical interpretation of reality, all the while seeking the legitimacy of the scientific enterprise. This time, Chopra claimed to have caused the recent earthquake by the power of his meditation. On the show he was going to talk about how the energy flow from his chakras was consciously guiding the universe to do his will, but the skeptics with their negative energy were inducing power fluctuations in his

meditation field, causing unfortunate accidents like the recent earthquake.

Selvi began placing playing cards face down on the floor. She announced to her mother that she had invented a game. For every unjustified knowledge claim that Chopra made, she would turn over one card after first trying to guess what it was by counting the open cards and calculating the odds. Sandanam tried hard to keep a straight face as she turned up the volume. The chirping of crickets faded into the background as the calm, soothing voice of blissful unreason filled the room.

BS

Ajita Kamal is the founder and administrator of www.nirmukta.com. This article, first published on nirmukta website, is the second in a series of introductory articles he is writing on naturalistic philosophy.

People can do without religion...but they cannot do without communion, fidelity and love. Nor can they do without spirituality...Being an atheist by no means implies that I should castrate my soul! The human spirit is far too important a matter to be left up to priests, mullahs or spiritualists.

Andre Comte-Sponville

The Book of Atheist Spirituality (2008)

From the President of FIRA

Narendra Nayak

An Atheist in Periyar's Land

Tamil Nadu, formerly known as Madras State, was the area in which the Self Respect Movement was started by E.V.Ramaswamy in the early years of the twentieth century. It was for the first time that the so called lower castes rebelled against the hegemony of the brahmins and started a movement which rejected all superstitions, religious rituals and the highest one of them- the god! So, in this state whichever party that comes to power has to conform to the ideology of EVR Thanthai Periyar as he came to be known. So, in this state one can expect that the ideology of the rationalist movement cannot expect any significant opposition.

My first programs in Tamil Nadu started accidentally. Though my college education has been in Chennai and am quite fluent in Tamil, my first interaction in that language came by an accident. In 2004 if my memory serves right, there was the second national teachers' science convention at Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. I had an interaction with the all the participants as a sort of curtain raiser for the training session that was to follow. The usual controversy about the medium of the language came up - English or Hindi? The North Indians wanted it to be in Hindi while the others insisted on English. I finally settled for a compromise that I would speak in both languages. One gentleman from the audience objected and said that it should be English only. I replied to him in Tamil saying that I could have that interaction in Tamil itself if he



wanted but the others would not understand a word of it! There was such a deafening applause from his group of about ten people and the whole atmosphere turned cordial. I had my interaction in Hindi and English. When the talk was over this gentleman came to me and asked me whether I could have a program in Tamil at his place. He was Dr.Madhavan, the director of the planetarium at Tiruchirapally. So, started my tours of Tamil Nadu! My first program was a two day interaction for students of a few girls' colleges and it went on very well- in Tamil! Though I started my program with a disclaimer that my Tamil is not very good- some of the girls came and told me that my Tamil was super!

With this started my tours of Tamil Nadu. After the Trichy interaction, there was one more at the Chennai planetarium arranged by Dr.Iyamperumal, the VC and the Director. That was the beginning of a wonderful, fulfilling relationship with that

organisation which continues even today and hopefully for many years to come. Along with these programs other organisations like trade unions, Tamilandu Science Forum started having our programs in many places. Tamil Nadu rationalist forum was a member of FIRA but had not arranged for any of my interactions as they had not known that I could communicate in Tamil. But once they came to know of it Dr.Veeramani and Kumaresan have arranged quite a few programs and even training sessions. I would like to share some of my experiences with our readers.

In Erode one of our interactions was at the hall which was the first one founded by Periyar. But, before the program was to start, the local organiser told me that I should not say anything about god as it was a very controversial topic. I said yes, but when my talk started I told the audience that I was very proud that i was having the opportunity of speaking at the auditorium built by Periyar but had been told by the organisers not to say anything about god as they felt it was a very controversial topic. I also told them that in this auditorium it

would be a controversial topic if one would say that there were a god and not the other way round! I told them that I am starting my talk with quoting Periyar- *There is no god, there is no god, there is no god at all.* The applause was thunderous and the members of the managing committee told me that the auditorium was hired by the local organisers saying that it was for a science program and they were not aware of what it was! They also said that due to the lack of this understanding that they had even charged rent for it! They assured me that the next time I come over there they will organise the program themselves, not charge any rent and even arrange for all the other facilities at their expense! We had quite a few interactions at various schools and colleges. That series of programs went on very well.

We have close contacts with Aruchamy of Coimbatore of the organisation called Periyar dravida Kazhagam who has provided the know how and the manpower for quite a few programs shot by the major channels like Discovery, BBC, Australian TV etc. Their group arranged for our



There is no god

There is no god

There is no god at all

He who invented god is a fool

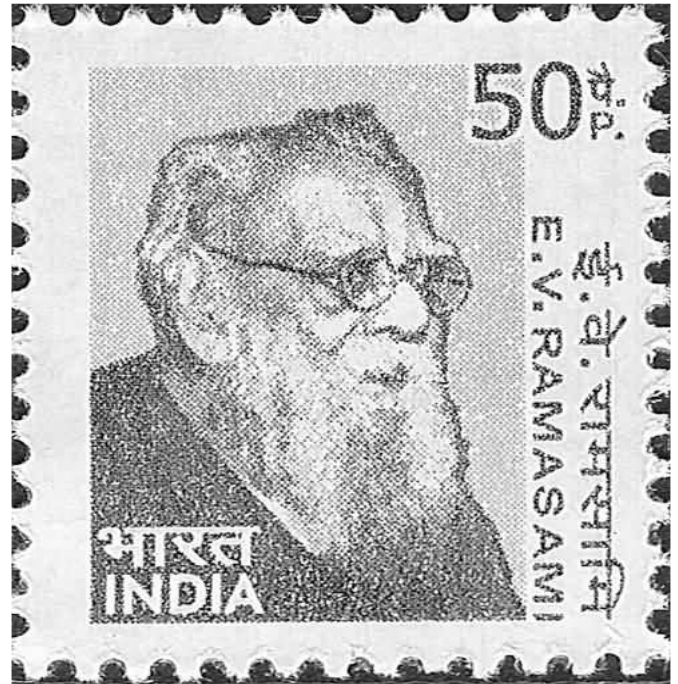
**He who propagates god is a
scoundrel**

**He who worships god is a
barbarian**

Periyar EVR

interactions in quite a few places. At one time the Puttaparthi prestidigitator had come to Chennai and had allegedly 'materialised' rings for a quite few of the DMK ministers. At that time we had a series of programs in which I 'materialised' the usual things along with rings and distributed them much to the delight of the audience who loved the parody of the ministers! The publicity because of these attracted the attention of many other groups including the association of High Court lawyers of the state and some trade unions too. In 2006 September a series of programs was organised in Chennai and the first one was that of the anniversary celebration of a magazine held at one of the well known auditoriums of Chennai. After my lecture demonstration some people came back stage and started some arguments. But, the editor of the magazine told me that I need not handle them and he ticked them off. They went away threatening that they would see how my next programs would go on. The next few programs went on uneventfully but at one of the programs at a place called Porur a few people came with stones in their hand and told the organiser of the program that my talk would not be allowed. There were police around but they instead of assuring protection told me that we better have it some other day. That program was to celebrate Periyar's birth day and imagine it being called off in Tamil Nadu! At that time i wrote a stinker of a letter to the chief minister and also the commissioner of Police of Chennai.

Later on when Aruchamy and his friends came to know of this incident they arranged for a program in the very same place and this time they were ready for any eventuality! There were around a thousand people who had come and there was not a whimper of protest from any one! There have been dozens of such presentations including many training programs conducted by various organisations from Tamil Nadu Science Forum, Tamilandu rationalist forum, Birla planetarium etc. During these tours I had the occasion to



meet many interesting people including a so called 'fire swami' at Tanjavur, many die hard Hindutwavadis, hard core Christian proselytizers and such. On one of these tours I investigated the famous Nadi jotidam of Vaitheeswaran Kovil etc. The last mentioned has been posted as one of my earliest on www.nirmukta.com.

But, the latest is what happened on the 17th inst. I was invited by the director of the Planetarium Dr.Iyam perumal to deliver a lecture demo on scientific temper. There was very good coverage by the press and other media. However on the next day I started receiving calls on my mobile some of which were threatening me to repeat what I said at that program in public. I had not realised what had happened but came to know later that some vested interests of the Hindutwavadi groups had started the publicity that our miracle exposure program was anti Hindu! This point has been clarified again and again so, there is no need for any further explanation. But, it is a very good sign that our program has had an impact and the vested interests have felt threatened! I forwarded the numbers to some of our people who asked for the address so that they said one such program could be organised in their very locality! The brave warriors of Hindutva did not have the courage to give their address! That apart, Dr.Iyamperumal has informed me

that he had got a number of enquiries for my phone number and he has told all of them to kindly send their request by letter and he would give them the required information by post. He also expressed his regret for all the adverse calls but I told him that we thrive in adversity as it was nothing new to us. The strangest part of the whole controversy is that none of those who called had attended the program. All their surmises were based on the newspaper reports! Dr.Iyamperumal gave me the very good news that all the children who attended the three day camp had a very good opinion of our presentation and were praising it! The reactions were all

from people who had based their opinion on the newspaper reports and the statement of the BJP office bearer. This clearly shows their ideological bankruptcy!

Anyway, a number of programs have been planned at Chennai by our supporters. In fact Dr.Iyamperumal has promised to have one full day interactions open to public. When we had such in February first week during a science festival at the same venue this year, the response was overwhelming and it had to be wound up because of the large crowds which could not be controlled.

BS

God has to be preached by one. It is not enough if one simply preaches. One must blindly believe what another preaches. Not only that. One must be made to believe god by force or compulsion. Unless one takes so much pain, poor god cannot enter the minds of others. Yet god is said to be omnipotent.

What a pity?

Periyar EVR

Collected Works (2005)

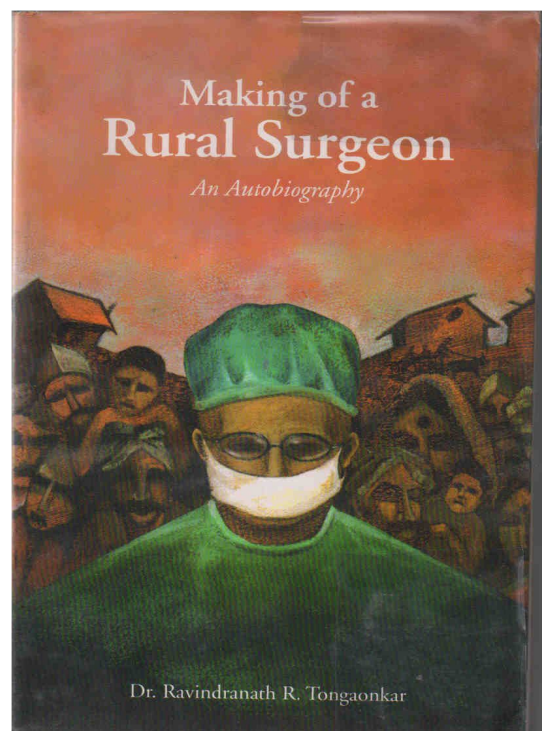


Saga of a Rationalist Surgeon

Prabhakar Nanawaty

When complete healthcare system in India is deteriorating rapidly and is subjected to whips and fancies of a few individuals, politicians and their cronies and policy makers it has become extremely difficult for a medical practitioner to sustain myriad pressures and turbulences. Dr. R R Tongaonkar is an exemplary person who not only sustained all the problems while practicing the surgery in a remotest corner of Maharashtra for last 38 years but also lead a satisfactory life in the process. As he rightly mentions, Dondaicha is neither village nor a township but which has all the disadvantages and drawbacks of both urban and rural conditions. Dr. R R Tongaonkar, a rank holder in MS, opted willingly for severe life by deciding to start practicing in a village where even minimum infra-structural facilities like transport, communication, electricity, running water, sanitation etc were lacking. In addition to these problems there is a lack of awareness of health and medical care in rural region. Poverty distances the sick from physicians. The demands of the rural life are very different to the demands of city living. He might have felt to obey his father's wish and continue his father's legacy of social service and help poor, as far as possible.

Tongaonkar's father was a typical Gandhian who believed in simplicity, hard working and disciplined lifestyle. He was a



visionary and a dreamer. He had cherished a dream that his son will one day become a doctor in his village and serve poor. He himself missed the opportunity to practice 'Ayurveda' since freedom struggle was on his priority list. Tongaonkar's mother, a schoolteacher was also a good motivator. His marriage with Asha, who is a medical graduate, assisted him throughout his professional career. In fact he attributes his success in life to his wife and his family members. She managed all the administrative routine jobs of the rural hospital leaving him to concentrate in the surgery. In fact Doctor stresses that if one wants to practice in a village atmosphere, it

is mandatory that both husband and wife should be medical professionals for obvious reasons.

After going through the internship at Mission Hospital, Miraj, under the guidance of renowned and dedicated surgeons, he took decision to settle down in Dondaicha. He had to start *ab-initio*, right from finding a place for the hospital, arranging the basic surgical facilities, setting operation theatre, and other mundane facilities. He started OPD to establish himself as doctor to treat any patient and perform surgeries even if they are outside the field of his expertise. He was forced to gain expertise in almost all the branches of medicine since he has to survive in the rural conditions. He used common sense approach in most of the circumstances and found solutions to problems, which were peculiar in nature. Dr. Tongaonkar narrates his experiences of initial days of his running the hospital, days of practicing, he used to visit the patients on bicycle, how he used to be impatient and under tension, how he used to take night calls, the episode about conducting the surgery in the remotest village without any light. If one can go thoroughly into the details of chapters like improving hospitals in rural areas, surgical skills, finance and income tax planning, doctor - patient relationship, academic qualifications etc, there are many useful tips and suggestions which can be implemented without any difficulty. The gist of his life long experience is made available to a reader to follow, learn and practice. We have a tendency to believe that as we grow older there is nothing to learn. This is not so. Dr. Tongaonkar took troubles to improve his surgical skills till his retirement. He continuously updated his knowledge and skills in order to keep up with the rapid pace of changes in the medical technology.

As one reader comments, the autobiography read like an interesting novel and one would like to finish in one sitting. The book is all about making a

. The book is all about making a person, who has zeal to work hard, face challenges, be methodical, be humane, and be rational, under all conditions and circumstances. He practices humanistic approach in his professional, social and family life. *‘Making of a Rural Surgeon’* is a story of an extremely talented rational and humane person who wants to share his experiences with the readers.

Dr. R R Tongaonkar was president of *Andhshraddha Nirmoolan Samitee (ANS)* Dhule District Unit for a number of years.

a person, who has zeal to work hard, face challenges, be methodical, be humane, and be rational, under all conditions and circumstances. He practices humanistic approach in his professional, social and family life. *‘Making of Rural Surgeon’* is a story of an extremely talented rational and humane person who wants to share his experiences with the readers. He does not claim that whatever he did need not be taken as a model and follow ditto.

One will certainly appreciate the way in which he practiced his profession throughout his career. He never liked the recent trend of medical practice as profit making business venture rather than as a noble profession. In spite of changed circumstances he avoided all unethical practices like unnecessary investigations and surgeries, cut practice, prescription of costly and unnecessary medicine, accepting gifts from pharmaceutical companies, giving and receiving commissions in return for referral and diagnostics, etc. It requires a great courage and willpower to practice ethically specially in the prevailing medical field. Ethics are our character makers. Qualities such as consideration, empathy, discipline, integrity, patience, simplicity, detachment, appreciation, honesty, compassion are in fact imbibed in Doctor's life. He practiced ethics as strict moral code.

He had a number of contributions made towards his medical profession. He took initiative to form Association of Rural Surgeons of India and convince the public at large and government about their role in rural development. He also took the issue of Un-Banked Directed Blood Transfusion (UDBT). Because of some slippage while drafting the blood bank regulations about blood storage and distribution, rural doctors can be put behind bar if they resorted to directed blood transfusion during emergencies. The issue was taken up by Dr. Tongaonkar and his like minded colleagues at appropriate level to amend the law in favor of such emergencies. In addition to name and fame in his own field, he had commitment to society and took lot of interest in social activities in and around Dondaicha. He was a president of Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samitee (ANS) Dhule District Unit for number of years. His assistance to ANS activities in this part of Maharashtra are well appreciated by one and all. As a Rotarian he conducted number of health camps for poor tribals.

As he rightly mentions in the introduction, many readers may not agree with his views

about God, soul and alternate therapeutic practices. However he expresses his views on these matters like any other rationalist. He argues against the concept of God and soul and their futility in one's life. He had included a full chapter on 'Alternate medicine and my experience'. In one of his papers on this subject, he expressed his views that one has to go into details of these methods, do basic scientific research as stipulated by modern science. A well-established hernia can't be treated by any other means except surgery. He does not believe in any unscientific treatment. In addition to problems faced by rural surgeon in his professional life, he had to face the problem of children's education. In spite of his busy schedule, Tongaonkar took full responsibility of parenting of his one daughter and two sons. The family is the basic social unit of the society and therefore, the quality of parenting is a reflection of the quality of our society. We need to examine our parenting and question how we raise our children. Dr. Tongaonkar ensured that his children did not inherit the issues and problems that he had faced or sometimes ignored. He is now a retired person and has handed over the responsibility to his son who is practicing in same way as his father did.

As Dr. T E Udwadia, Head of the Foundation for Research in Community Health (FRCH) puts it aptly "This book cannot be reviewed – it has to be read."

Making of a Rural Surgeon: An Autobiography

By Dr Ravindranath R. Tongaonkar

Price Rs. 170; pp 243 (2007).

(For copy of the book, please contact on email: rrtongaonkar@gmail.com)

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Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha

(Bangalore Rationalist Association)

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha conducts monthly lectures and discussions on various topics. Those who are interested in attending the programmes conducted by the association may contact:

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BVV Subba Rao (Phone: 09886679088. Email: babukadur44@gmail.com)

Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan

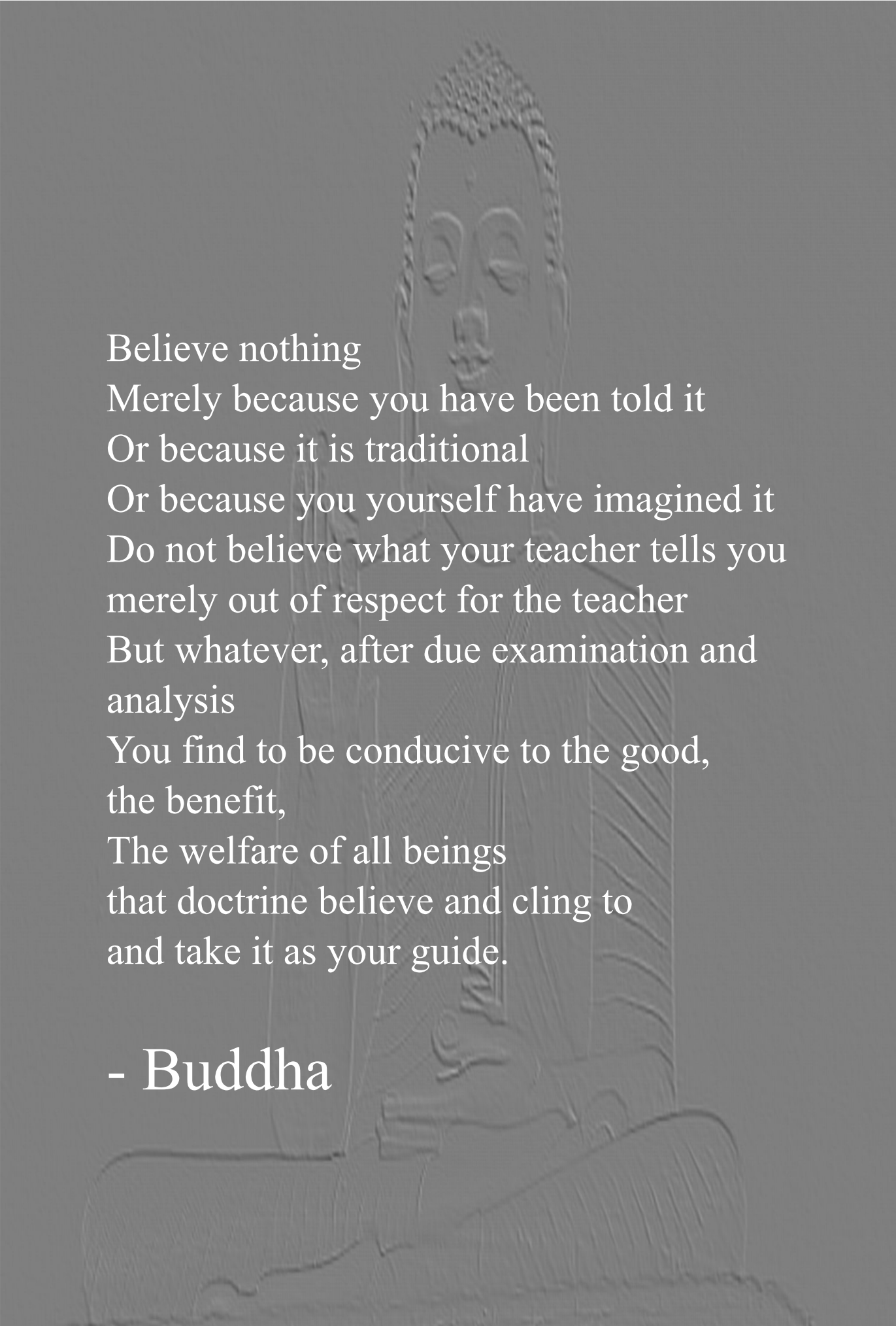
Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay.

The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."
- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.
- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.
- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.
- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.



- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.
- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise) —not just most of them.
- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.
- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.



Believe nothing
Merely because you have been told it
Or because it is traditional
Or because you yourself have imagined it
Do not believe what your teacher tells you
merely out of respect for the teacher
But whatever, after due examination and
analysis
You find to be conducive to the good,
the benefit,
The welfare of all beings
that doctrine believe and cling to
and take it as your guide.

- Buddha